

# THE FREE THINKER

Craig Nicholls of the Vines has studied all the greats—from the Kinks to Nirvana. And now, with the hit single “Get Free” under his belt, he’s ready to graduate with honors.

by Alan di Perna

**“I don’t go outside that much. I’m freaked out by riding in cars.”** Craig Nicholls, the Vines guitarist, singer and songwriter, is quite a case. Reclusive, fragile, precocious and obsessive, he reportedly exists on a diet of junk food and marijuana. Nicholls belongs to the grand fraternity of gifted rock eccentrics whose membership also includes the Beach Boys’ Brian Wilson, Pink Floyd’s Syd Barrett and the producer Phil Spector.

The Vines’ music is steeped in rock’s rebellious, antisocial legacy as well. Nicholls has discovered the raunchy lost chord that links Sixties garage rock and Nineties grunge. He’s fused to the hot wire that connects late-Sixties psychedelia with shoe-gazing Nineties dream pop and Britpop. To hear the Vines’ debut album, *Highly Evolved* (Capitol), is to have all of rock history flash before your eyes—all the good bits, anyway.

The band has been linked with the new, back-to-basics wave of rock bands that includes the Hives, the Strokes and the White Stripes. But Nicholls’ vision is broader than that. So it’s no surprise that many critics have hailed the Vines as the saviors who will restore real rock and roll to its rightful place. At times, Nicholls seems ready to crack under the weight of it all. Onstage, the 24-year-old Australian’s eyes roll up into his head like someone having a seizure. His tongue hangs out of his mouth like a dishtowel left out to dry in the breeze.

“It’s a foggy and distant world to me, all this fame stuff,” he says.

Mostly he likes to stay at home and write

and record songs. That’s how it has been ever since the early Nineties when Nicholls, then 15, formed the Vines in Sydney, Australia, with bassist Patrick Matthews and drummer David Olliffe. They took their name from the Vynes, a genuine Sixties garage rock band that Nicholls’ dad played in. Nicholls, Matthews and Olliffe played the occasional pub gig, but mainly they stayed behind closed doors, honing their repertoire and musical approach. Eventually they landed a production deal that brought them to Los Angeles in July 2001, and began recording at the historic Sunset Sound Factory with producer Rob Schnapf (Beck, Foo Fighters, Guided by Voices). What was supposed to be a four-week project ended up taking half a year, as Nicholls’ perfectionism led him in pursuit of the ideal sounds and arrangements for his songs. In the process, Olliffe exited the band and was replaced by Hamish Rosser.

But all the hard work and strife paid off when infectious Vines singles like “Highly

Evolved,” “Factory” and “Get Free” caused a major stir in England. “Get Free” is making inroads in the States as well. The Vines have begun touring with Nicholls’ old schoolmate Ryan Griffiths onboard as second guitarist, but all Nicholls wants to do is make another album. There have been tantrums, freak-outs and even vague threats of suicide. But when the conversation turns to music—his own and all the great bands that have influenced him—rock’s new *enfant terrible* turns out to be insightful, agreeable and remarkably clearheaded.

**GUITAR WORLD** How do you feel about your band being labeled “garage rock” and lumped in with the Hives, the Strokes and the White Stripes?

**CRAIG NICHOLLS** I’m not sure what “garage rock” means, really. I think the reason why we get associated with those other bands is that we’re all just original new rock bands. We’re all about the same age. And even though we’re obviously very

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## THE VINES

different bands, it's all rock music and it comes from our hearts. So it's not like the Backstreet Boys or anything like that. We're not being told by other people what to sing or what to wear.

**GW** There's a real Nineties grunge element in the Vines' music. You're not just referencing the Sixties like some of those other bands.

**NICHOLLS** Hopefully we're referencing the Sixties, the Nineties and the decade we're in right now—whatever the hell they're going to call that. We like the Chemical Brothers as well. And OutKast. I love the new Muse single. So it's all a big combination.

**GW** Where did it begin for you? What was

the first band you fell for?

**NICHOLLS** Oh, this Australian rock band named Ratcat. Then I suppose when it really got hardcore for me was when Nirvana's *Nevermind* came out. It was so inspiring. That's when I really got into music. After that, I got into Pavement and Beck. Then I went through a Beatles phase and a Kinks phase. The Kinks totally influenced us—Ray Davies has such a cool storytelling way of writing songs. I also like Nineties British bands like Blur and the Verve a lot. I think [former Verve singer/guitarist] Richard Ashcroft is a genius.

**GW** You named your band after your dad's. Was he a kind of musical mentor? Did he

turn you on to a lot of Sixties rock?

**NICHOLLS** He didn't really. When I got my first acoustic guitar, he taught me a 12-bar blues. That was the only thing anyone ever taught me on guitar. I went from there on my own. But I remember hearing the Beach Boys when I was growing up—all their early hits. And then I found Beatles albums around the house. It was just an amazing thing for me, because long after the band existed I could go listen to their third album or their eighth album. That was a lot of musical information. And it's great art to experience. Even though I couldn't go see the band play, it didn't really matter; I had the records and the pictures. The songs had so much in them and the recordings were so good.

**GW** Do the other guys in the band have the same musical tastes as you?

**NICHOLLS** Everyone does, yeah. Although we all have our different likes and dislikes. There's a few cases where I'll say, "I can't believe you listen to that band, mate. Please check out this Kinks album from '77." I do my best to turn the other guys on to stuff I find. They do the same. But in our band, it's mostly about the songs I write. The songs let us know where to take the arrangement and recording. We have our own thing where we want to get the recordings more crisp and clean, and for the songwriting to move forward. That's what we do when we put tape loops on there, or strange effect pedals on the piano.

**GW** The arrangement of "In the Jungle" is cool, the way the tempo slows down in the B section.

**NICHOLLS** Oh, thanks. That was the first good song that I wrote, I think. And yeah, I wanted to have tempo changes in it. It was a big puzzle, that song, and solving it really inspired me. I was so buzzed about writing "In the Jungle" that it drove me to write "Get Free." I recorded it on a four-track in my bedroom. I had a little drum kit there as well. I did the beat, and it opened up all these things in my head—this whole world. I could see just the architecture of the whole song, the arrangement and melodies and how they fit over different riffs within the song.

**GW** "Get Free" has a great bridge. It changes the mood of the whole song.

**NICHOLLS** Yeah, it does. It's more melodic than the rest of it. We were playing "Get Free" for about a year, but we didn't have a middle section. That came much later. It just fell into place when we were recording the song. I never imagined that "Get Free" was going to be the single or anything. But after we finished recording and mixing it, we knew that it would be a good first single. It's a rock song; it's heavy. But it's like pop music as well, because the middle section

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adds something to it.

**GW** When you got to L.A. last year, how much of the album did you have written?

**NICHOLLS** All of it. We had at least 25 songs to choose from.

**GW** "Homesick" sounds like it might have been written after you left Australia and were missing home.

**NICHOLLS** Yeah, it sounds like that, but it was written in Australia. That's the thing: there is something personal about the lyrics. Songs that are just a fairy tale are boring. But songs you can relate to, that's where the power of music is. In the moment you're listening to it, everything fits together.

**GW** What was your approach like to record-

ing the guitars on the album?

**NICHOLLS** I guess it was very simple, obvious and extreme. On some songs we would record all the verse guitars first. A lot of them were clean sounds. Then we would record the distorted sounds, the choruses, after. We doubled the guitars a lot. I'd usually get the solos down in a few takes. I knew the notes, and Rob Schnapf was so good at recording.

**GW** A lot of the slower, more psychedelic songs, like "Country Yard," "Mary Jane" and "1969," have a lot of nice, flangy, chorusy guitar sounds. Did you have a lot of vintage pedals on hand to create those tones?

**NICHOLLS** Rob did that. He had all the

pedals. We didn't have a lot of equipment, and I didn't know about guitars or amps. I had a couple of pedals, but I knew nothing about that. All my focus was on using my imagination for songwriting and having my head in the clouds. I had trouble turning on an amplifier. But I'm getting better at it now.

**GW** You got on well with Rob Schnapf, but your drummer, David Olliffe, didn't.

**NICHOLLS** Yeah. Dave left about three-quarters of the way through recording the album. He was getting a bit bored. And he wasn't happy because Rob wanted to try using a different drummer for a track that wasn't working out. I think Dave was a bit pissed off at Rob. He's apologized to Rob since.

**GW** Did you really try to get Ringo Starr on drums after David left?

**NICHOLLS** [laughs] Someone did, yeah. It was pretty wild. I thought they were joking when they told me. But someone did try to call Ringo up for a song we were going to record. He was busy or on holiday or something, so he couldn't do it.


**GW** Did you learn a lot from making the album?

**NICHOLLS** Really a lot. And I think the new songs I've written since then are a lot more mature. The lyrics are a lot better. The ideas I have are just jumping out at me in my head. I can hear the sounds. And I can anticipate a really magical feeling when I sing this stuff. That's what I'm focused on now. We're playing live shows and everything, but we really want to make the next album. I need something to do with myself—with my head. I'm real happy with this album, but I'm keen to get the next one done, because I have it all in my head, just like I had this last one in my head. I was almost going mad before we got to America—like, "We have to do this. I can't stop thinking about it."

**GW** The word is that you're not too crazy about playing live, that you'd rather just be in the studio all the time.

**NICHOLLS** There's usually a lot of energy in playing our songs at high volume in front of people. It's a good feeling, but it's physically, mentally and emotionally draining. I don't want to lose my voice or my hearing before I get a chance to follow through on all the ideas I have with this band. People are getting excited about us now and that's nice. We're getting excited too. But I'm just trying to make sure we don't get away from our real objective, which is to make albums and progress with the songwriting. So we're going to try to record next year. Exactly how soon we don't know.

**GW** You gotta ride out this wave first.

**NICHOLLS** Yeah. I have to really start taking medications so I can stop talking about the next album. When I start talking about it, I start to become anxious. 

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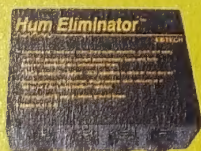


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